

CROSSING THE FLOOR

For a question to be resolved in Parliament, a vote must be taken. Parliamentary parties usually vote as a team, with all party members voting the same way. Crossing the floor occurs when a member of a parliamentary party walks across the chamber to vote against their party. This is done in full view of other members of parliament, the media and the public.

Procedure

A division is a formal parliamentary vote in which each person's vote is counted and recorded. Those voting in favour of a motion sit on the right side of the Speaker or President and those voting against, sit on the left side. The votes are tallied by counting the number of members of parliament sitting on each side. The side with the majority of votes wins. A member of a parliamentary party who votes against their party is said to have crossed the floor.

Frequency

Members of parliamentary parties rarely cross the floor, because parties expect loyalty from their team members. Crossing the floor publicly demonstrates disagreement within the party. It may be seen to be giving greater preference to the needs of the electorate than the needs of the party. For this reason it may be popular with the people in an electorate, but not with the party. A member of parliament who crosses the floor may be considered a traitor to their party.

Members of parliament may be persuaded not to cross the floor because they know that:

- their party provides support and financial security in return for loyalty
- their party may impose a ban on crossing the floor
- their action may only make a difference if enough people cross the floor to change the result of a vote. Without the necessary support to change the result, crossing the floor is a controversial act that may not have the desired effect.

If a party or coalition of parties has a slim majority of only one or two votes, it becomes even more important for team members to stick together. Party whips (team managers) are responsible for making sure that party members know how to vote and are not planning to cross the floor. In close votes, whips must be particularly vigilant about how team members vote (see *Party Whip*).

Conscience vote

A conscience vote, or free vote, means that members of parliament are not obliged to vote with their party; instead, they can vote according to their own beliefs. A conscience vote is most commonly used to decide social issues or 'life and death' issues, such as abortion, euthanasia or capital punishment. Each parliamentary party decides if its members are allowed a conscience vote on a particular issue.

A conscience vote may be held in order to prevent members of parliament crossing the floor on a controversial issue which may otherwise cause embarrassment to the team, or to allow members of parliament to express their own strongly-held beliefs.

History

Although crossing the floor rarely occurs now, it has taken place more frequently in the past. From 1950 – 2004, 245 members of parliament crossed the floor, representing 24% of all members of parliament who served in this period. Only 12% of divisions were affected by these floor crossings.

Senator Reg Wright, from Tasmania, who served from 1950 to 1978, crossed the floor 150 times: the most times any member of parliament has done so.

Conscience votes are also rare. From 1950 to 2007, only 32 bills and other issues in the Parliament were decided by a conscience vote.



Senator Reg Wright crossed the floor 150 times during his 28 years in the Senate

National Archives of Australia, 7534608

LINKS

PEO website

Fact Sheet: *Voting in the Chambers*
www.peo.gov.au/learning/fact-sheets/voting-in-the-chambers.html

APH website

Parliamentary Library: *Crossing the floor in the Federal Parliament 1950 – August 2004*
www.tinyurl.com/APHLib-Crossingfloor

Parliamentary Library: *Conscience votes during the Howard Government 1996 – 2007*
www.tinyurl.com/APHLib-ConscienceVotes